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ABSTRACT

It is a good thing to demolish "magical thinking" if it refers to the view of language for which words have fixed, inevitable meanings. Words are often deprived of their meanings and reduced to verbal noises, producing involuntary responses like knee-reflexes. Various critics have discussed and written about the magical aspects of language, including the hold that the oppressor has on the oppressed through language. On the other hand, true magic consists of those rare moments when to speak, to know, and to beget-create are one. The evolution of the words "glamour" and "spelling" indicates the attempt to manage the inherent tension in language between logic and magic by cutting the two tendencies off from one another. (Two of the meanings of "spelling"--casting spells and ciphering letters--are etymologically related and "glamour," a magic spell or bewitchment, is related to "grammar.") Class assignments (such as asking students to dismantle a word, write about it, and create a new word; or having students make and wear masks representing themselves as students next assume another mask and character most opposite to their own and then change their writing in response to what they learned) can produce small instances of magic. In short, writing instructors should attempt to bring about the wonder, inspiration, and trance that all writers have experienced moments of, a psychic outbrust that may be called magic as illustrated in the anecdotes about Rebecca Cox Jackson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman with which this paper begins. (HB)

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Julia Wagner
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Glamour and Spelling: Reclaiming Magical Thinking in the Composition Classroom

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I want to begin by telling two stories. They're true stories. The first is about Rebecca Cox Jackson. She was born a free black woman in Philadelphia in 1795. In 1830, during a thunderstorm, she experienced an intense religious conversion. At the time of her conversion, she could not read or write. In her account of her "self-education", she recalls one moment when her shame at her illiteracy "pierced her soul like a sword." But then, she writes: "these words were spoken in my heart, 'Be faithful and the time shall come when you can write'" (Gilbert & Gubar, 232). A year after the thunderstorm, she found one day, suddenly, that she could read the Bible. And after that, she was able to put her visions and dreams down on paper -- and they are extraordinary. She left husband, family, and home for a life as a Shaker visionary and preacher, a healer, and a writer. She and her friend (also named Rebecca -- Rebecca Perot) founded a Black Shaker sisterhood in 1851.

The second story: Charlotte Perkins Gilman describes in her autobiography the "dark fog" that enveloped her after she gave birth to her daughter in 1885. She went for treatment to the famous physician, the "female specialist" Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. (Strangely, he was also a part-time novelist.) Dr. Mitchell was the most famous proponent of "the rest cure," a widely-used treatment for the many middle and upper-class American and English women in the 19th century who were suffering from a variety of non-specific illnesses. A brief description of the rest cure: it employed techniques known today as brainwashing: total isolation and sensory deprivation, to start with. Usually a patient had to lie still on her back in a room for six weeks, and was not permitted to read or have visitors. The patient was fed only bland white food, was given frequent douches and enemas (invasions of every orifice), and then instructed in "patience, resignation, and consolation." She wasn't to share her feelings with others, since that, according to Mitchell, would make matters worse and would bore the listener too (Showalter, 139).

Of course, the rest cure didn't work for everyone. Virginia Woolf underwent it and condemned Mitchell afterwards. It made the young and ill Jane Addams even more ill. As for Charlotte Perkins Gilman, she later wrote of Mitchell's instructions to her for life after the rest cure: "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time...Have but two hours intellectual life a day. <u>And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live.</u>" Gilman almost lost her mind, but regained her sanity after this "cure" by divorcing her husband, moving to California, and picking up pen or pencil: she made her living lecturing, editing, teaching, and writing feminist works, the most famous of which is <u>The Yellow Wallpaper</u>.

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I'd like you to keep these stories in mind as I discuss magic, false and true.

It's a good thing to demolish "magical thinking" in our classrooms, if we're talking about the view of language and meaning I.A. Richards was railing against as early as 1938, the view that words have fixed, inevitable meanings, and that a writer's work is simply to place words side by side, as in a mosaic. Hence my students who say to me "I know what I mean, but I can't find the right words." Richards writes that "the view that meanings belong to words in their own right -- and the more sophisticated views which have the same effect -- are a branch of sorcery, a relic of the magical theory of names" (Richards, 71). He adds that "the most determined efforts do no more than free us from it now and then for a few precious moments." Of course, we want to help our students experience those few precious moments.

And it's very important to critique "magical thinking" in our courses, if we're talking about thinking that leaves one wide open to the opportunistic rhetorician George Orwell excoriates in "Politics and the English Language," the same kind W.H. Auden calls "the black magician." Auden describes this black magician's technique:

> In his spells the words are deprived of their meanings and reduced to syllables or verbal noises...For millions of people today, words like Communism, Capitalism, Imperialism...have ceased to be words the meanings of which can be inquired into and discussed...and to which the response is as involuntary as a knee-reflex (Berthoff, 99).

Freud analyzes these "knee-reflexes" in his work on group psychology and the group mind, pointing to what he calls "the truly magical power of words" as the most potent tool of a would-be ruler: "Anyone who wishes to produce an effect on (the group mind)...must paint in the most forcible colors, he must exaggerate, and he must repeat the same thing again and again" (117).

The group mind as it shows itself in Paulo Freire's students actually comes from the magical hold the oppressor has on the oppressed. He describes it this way:

> ...The oppressor is 'housed' within the people, and their resulting ambiguity makes them fearful of freedom. They resort (stimulated by the oppressor) to magical explanations or a false view of God, to whom they fatalistically transfer the responsibility for their oppressed state (Freire, 48).

Freire's work involves enabling students to see "the will of God" as historical, and to see that the relationship between language and reality is culturally constructed. If that's getting rid of magical thinking, then yes, that's our work.

But there's magic and then there's magic. Now I want to talk about the kind of magic Peter Elbow writes about at the end of his Writing With Power, the magic that, he warns, is catching; the "magical view of writing" that is useful because it encompasses more than the sum total of advice about what makes writing good; and the magical view of writing that "helps [us] believe what is necessary and true: that [our] words can have enormous power" (Elbow, 372).

In his recent essay on magic and rhetoric, William Covino distinguishes between what he calls false-incorrect magic and true-correct magic, which I'll shorten into false and true magic here. False magic is everything I've just described; Covino sums it up succinctly: it's "practiced as enforced doctrine or the coercive reduction of the possibilities for action." He analyzes the mechanisms of this reduction in a wonderful close reading of the National Enguirer and its false magic rhetoric. Covino's description of true, correct magic, on the other hand, sounds almost like a statement of purpose for cultural studies: "true-correct magic is practiced as constitutive inquiry or the coercive expansion of the possibilities for action (Covino, 27).

The anthropolcgist Evans-Pritchard (in his work among the Azande) understands magic as the enlargement of possiblities for action in its social context; the main objective of the use of magic isn't to change nature but rather to combat mystical powers and events caused by other people. Many writers emphasize the role of changing the self in combatting these "mystical powers"; the peace activist, witch, and writer Starhawk calls magic "the art of evoking power-from-within" as opposed to "power-over." The Jungian Eric Neumann writes about this power-within and the word; "what mystics knew of the generative power of the word," he writes, "and the 'word magic' known to us from primitive psychology embodies the strange unity in which to speak, to know, and to beget-create are still one...Primitive man regarded this creativity of the psyche as magic, and rightly so, for it transforms reality, and will always do so" (203). I know one of the most difficult tasks I face -- maybe the most difficult task I face -- is to get my thoughts, my words, and my actions to be one, and I think here is the simplest definition of magic: those rare moments when to speak, to know, and to beget-create are one.

Magic is an intrinsic characteristic of language, whether seen simply in the generative magic of naming, or in considering the origin of language itself. I don't have time here to go into Suzanne Langer's "festal dance" origin theory of language, but in a small nutshell, Langer argues that language itself first served the function of communion and only secondly of communication. She also describes how speech came before words, and how the symbolic function of language over time passed from the act of speech into the word itself (Berthoff, 272). What's important in this speech/word distinction, and in this communication/communion distinction, is that there is a simultaneous existence, in language, between logic (discursive language, operating out in sentences) and magic (words: centers of perception, meaning, naming chaos). So inevitably language, in its discursiveness, simultaneously depends on and attempts to shed words in their metaphorical, symbolic, incantory nature.

For the present, this tension seems to be managed by cutting the two tendencies off from one another; nothing demonstrates this more concisely than the evolution of the words "glamour" and "spelling". Words and magic were originally understood to go together. Two of the meanings of "spelling," casting spells and ciphering letters, are etymologically related, and "glamour", a magic spell or bewitchment, is related to "grammar". Mary Daly, in her book Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language, sums up what became of the twins: "Grammar is reduced to the tidy arrangement of words in a sentence. Glamour is voided of life, made mindless and soulless as a made-up mannequin (24)." Daly's project in the Wickedary is to invoke the magical power of language through the naming, disnaming, and renaming of reality. She analyzes words in ways that problematize the realities they create and represent, and she redefines and creates words to evoke understandings which, in turn, expand the possibilities for action. "Words as wasters/erasers," she writes, can be transformed into "words as labryses, or double axes" because of their magical powers.

Magical thinking, then, for Daly, is simply another word for what Freire calls conscientization. Her Wickedary is a mind-boggling source of inspiration for teaching, and I am slowly finding ways to bring it into my freshman writing course. I'm using assignments that ask students to dismantle a word, to write about it (as Daly wrote about grammar and spelling) and then to revise or create a new word -- and I also ask them to use one or the other in a letter to the editor of a real newspaper. I've asked students to write spells, and to describe the conditions that would be necessary for putting the spells to work.

The word analyses have worked better than the spells, so far, and I think it's because I -- and my students -- are less sure of ourselves in nonanalytical but still classroom territory. Why venture into this territory at all? Because clearly intellectual understanding alone is not enough.

Freire writes a pedagogy of liberation. Starhawk writes, in her book Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery, a psychology of liberation. This is a significant shift, and it helps me to keep from despairing when I consider how for Freire and his students, action and reflection go together, when for me and my students, something else seems to be called for as the bonding agent. We are too often immobilized by reflection. One of my students actually described this immobilization in a word she made up in response to an assignment: telesolvisa, from sole/soul: alone, and television: seen far off; it means: seen/alone and far off. "It is the helpless feeling," she writes, "when you see something bad on the news and there's nothing you can do about it."

Starhawk uses rituals and exercises to help her students to move through psychological blocks of isolation, alienation, helpless and hopelessness -- when, in fact, the oppression is more internal than external; when, in fact, there is something the students can do about something they see on the TV. Since rainstorms and mysterious illnesses aren't readily assimilated by all, I am working to bring more of these exercises and rituals into my course. I use guided meditations regularly, and sometimes rituals. One example: students make masks representing

themselves as students, and they come to class wearing them one day. They walk around the room, spouting the same two or three phrases characteristic of them as students. After a while, they find the masks most opposite to them and trade, andtry walking around spouting the other's characteristic phrases. And so forth. I asked students then to work on this exercise by trying to change their writing in response to what they had learned. One student told me that as a result of this exercise, she was consciously trying to stop being such a good, agreeable -- and boring -- writer.

I like to think of these as small instances of magic, and indeed, thought about opening this presentation with my students' stories instead of Jackson's and Gilman's. I might have written about the overly-compliant student-writer's struggle, and I could also have written about another student who, through writing about the concepts of "mystification," "mystery," and the feminine "mystique," began to like the way she looked.

"Chance favors the prepared mind," I heard Ann Berthoff once say in a class, and I'm arguing, in short, for the legitimacy of classroom preparation for the chance that the wonder, the inspiration, the trance we all as writers have experienced moments of, might come to our composition students, too. I wait for the day when I can walk into a classroom and say, "Now we're going to study glamour."

It's extremely important to foster a student's awareness that she is -- - as David Bartholomae has put it -- not just writing but written by the languages available to her, that she is selected, created, fixed by language, and not the other way around. But perhaps magic is what comes when, for a moment, for a glimpse, it <u>is</u> the other way around.

* * *

In both of the stories I told at the beginning, the heroines shook off internal and external patriarchal confines and began to write in a kind of psychic outburst I call magic.

After the thunderstorm and before she received literacy as an answer to prayer, Rebecca Cox Jackson begged her brother, a prominent church member, to teach her to read and write. Although she was raising his children for him, he refused. He did act as her scribe -- a scribe, however, who edited her visionary dictations as he saw fit. This was a source of trouble, even anguish, for her. Once she was able to read and write, she as able to leave us with her memoirs, in which she wrote of her dreams about the magic of everyday experiences: "The Dream of the Cakes," for example, and "The Dream of Washing Quilts."

And Charlotte Perkins Gilman has left us with <u>The Yellow Wallpaper</u>, writing it, as she said later, because she was "naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape" (Showalter, 141). She sent a copy to Dr. Mitchell, and never received an acknowledgement, but she was told years later that he had admitted to friends that he had altered his "rest cure" since reading it (Showalter, 141). In <u>The Yellow Wallpaper</u>, a woman confined in a room for her rest cure under the false magical spell of her husband/doctor struggles to free the woman she sees trapped inside the wallpaper of the room. It's clear that she's gone kind of crazy when she

turns her back on everyone and starts ripping the paper off the walls to free the woman pacing underneath it, and the novella ends on the despairing note of a woman's descent into madness. But who knows. Maybe she will start to speak while ripping the wallpaper. Rituals like this have been known to produce magic.

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